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Lucia A Keegan 09/20/2006 03:23:17 PM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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SUBJECT: MFA SURPRISED BY CHIRAC CALL FOR MIDDLE EAST
CONFERENCE

REF: PARIS POINTS OF 9/18/06

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: When President Chirac announced Sept. 18 that he planned to call for an international conference on the Middle East, he caught the senior ranks of the MFA by surprise. For at least 24 hours, there was considerable confusion over what the French President meant. One MFA interlocutor insisted that Chirac was not calling for the international conference envisioned in Stage II of the roadmap. End summary.

What Chirac Said

¶2. (C) In an early morning interview with Europe 1 radio (reported ref Paris Points) on September 18, President Chirac announced that during the UN General Assembly in New York he would call for an international conference on the Middle East (i.e., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). He repeated his announcement in an interview that same day with Al-Arabiya television, and finally delivered the call itself during his speech to the General Assembly on September 19. Chirac said the conference would define the guarantees that the international community is prepared to offer the two parties as soon as they reach an agreement, and would "pave the way for a new future for the Middle East through a regional framework of collective security, economic integration and cultural dialogue."

MFA Caught Off Guard

¶3. (C) The Sept. 18 announcement was a surprise for the MFA,

according to Francois Thoizy, Foreign Minister Douste-Blazy's senior advisor for North Africa and the Gulf. In a Sept. 19 meeting with poloff, Thoizy indicated that the MFA had expected Chirac to call for a conference on Lebanon reconstruction (which he did separately), but the French President "apparently decided to expand the scope of the conference" to include the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. With no apparent guidance from Chirac's office, Thoizy was working on the assumption that there would still be only one conference -- an expanded Lebanon reconstruction conference. His confusion was shared by Herve Besancenot, MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt and the Levant. As of late Sept. 18, Besancenot assumed Chirac's announcement was a garbled reference to the Lebanon conference -- which, Besancenot said, the French would like to hold in Beirut in November or December 2006, security permitting. Failing that, the conference could be held in Paris. (Besancenot noted wryly that Chirac had approached the Saudis about holding the conference in Riyadh in hopes that the Kingdom would pick up the tab but the Saudis did not take the bait.)

¶4. (C) By late in the afternoon of Sept. 19, the MFA had begun to figure out what Chirac had in mind. Mariam Diallo, desk officer for Palestinian affairs, affirmed that Chirac did indeed call for two separate conferences, one for Lebanon reconstruction and one for the Middle East. She hastened to clarify that Chirac was not/not calling for the international conference described in Stage II of the roadmap (i.e., the conference that leads to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with provisional borders). Asked what guarantees such a conference might produce for the parties, Diallo speculated that Israel would be primarily interested in receiving security guarantees, and suggested that the enhanced UNIFIL force in southern Lebanon might serve as a useful model. She further speculated that the Palestinians would be interested primarily in political guarantees on sensitive questions such as the status of Jerusalem and the rights of Palestinian refugees.

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